



THE UNIVERSITY *of* EDINBURGH

Edinburgh Research Explorer

What is the role of social work in 'moral panics'?

Citation for published version:

Cree, V What is the role of social work in 'moral panics'?

Link:

[Link to publication record in Edinburgh Research Explorer](#)

Document Version:

Publisher's PDF, also known as Version of record

Publisher Rights Statement:

© Vivienne Cree (6 December 2013) 'What is the role of social work in moral panics?', <http://www.theguardian.com/social-care-network/social-life-blog+society/children>

General rights

Copyright for the publications made accessible via the Edinburgh Research Explorer is retained by the author(s) and / or other copyright owners and it is a condition of accessing these publications that users recognise and abide by the legal requirements associated with these rights.

Take down policy

The University of Edinburgh has made every reasonable effort to ensure that Edinburgh Research Explorer content complies with UK legislation. If you believe that the public display of this file breaches copyright please contact openaccess@ed.ac.uk providing details, and we will remove access to the work immediately and investigate your claim.



What is the role of social work in 'moral panics'?

A recent conference looked at the part social work may play in creating, fuelling and sustaining public scares and scandals

Vivienne Cree

Guardian Professional, Friday 6 December 2013 10.00 GMT



The story of Maria, the blonde, blue-eyed girl found living in a Roma camp in Greece, is an example of a 'moral panic'. Photograph: AFP/Getty Images

The proverb "the road to Hell is paved with good intentions" carries two meanings. Firstly, it's about procrastination – about all the things we mean to do and never get around to doing. Secondly, it refers to the unintended, bad consequences of our actions, and it is this meaning that is of importance to [moral panics](#) and social work.

What is a moral panic? In his seminal 1972 book, [Folk Devils and Moral Panics](#), Stan Cohen outlined the process of a moral panic:

- A condition, episode, person or group of persons emerges to become defined as a threat to society's values and interests.
- Its nature is presented in a stereotypical fashion by the mass media.
- The moral barricades are manned by editors, bishops, politicians and other right-thinking people; socially accredited experts pronounce their diagnoses and solutions.
- Ways of coping are evolved or (more often) resorted to.
- The condition then either disappears or becomes normalised and is no longer seen as "an issue".

A group of 45 academics, policymakers and practitioners from across the UK recently came together for the third seminar in a [series that has focused on children, the family and the state](#).

The seminar began with Martin Innes of Cardiff University looking at moral panics and policing, focusing on the "signal crimes" that come to take on particular prominence, and also the "folk devils" who populate our courts and prison cells.

Jan Fook of Kingston University considered the consequences of moral panics as they are played out in risk-averse social work practice. She argued that through critical reflection, the tacit or hidden ideas and assumptions that underlie our values and practice are uncovered; her plea was that we find ways of opening up our practice for scrutiny in order to become critically reflective practitioners.

The third speaker was Ray Jones of Kingston University, who looked at four moral panics, including the Hillsborough disaster and the Baby P case. In each instance there was, he argued, a link between politicians, the police and the press; each, he asserted, had a vested interest in creating a particular version of events, and in each case, identifiable "folk devils" were under attack.

Over the last year as our seminar series has progressed, there have been a number of moral panics; all have been controversial and all have elicited deep-seated feelings and emotions. The series began last November at the time of the emergence of the [Jimmy Savile affair](#). More recently, we [explored the removal of blonde-haired and blue-eyed Maria](#) from a Roma settlement in central Greece.

We have asked: What's going on here? Who are the targets? And what are the intended and unintended consequences of the current scare or scandal? It's easy to identify the "folk devil" in each situation, but it's much harder to face up to the part that social work may play in creating, fuelling and sustaining moral panics.

And yet we do: after all, [children](#) were removed from families in the midst of a moral panic in Cleveland in 1987 and following satanic abuse scares a few years later; today there is talk of extending the [child protection](#) "radar" to include public health matters such as childhood obesity; moreover, children are being removed from homes in greater numbers in England and Wales because of heightened concern about child abuse.

The seminar ended with a question that perplexes me still: is there ever a "good" moral panic?

Can or should social work use moral panics as a tool to instigate change that would not be possible otherwise? Chas Critcher, co-author of [Policing the Crisis: Mugging, the State and Law and Order](#) said "no" –

99% of moral panics are not good – there is always a distortion and always a moralisation.

He asked why there hasn't been a moral panic about the bankers, the energy companies or taxation?

Moral panics are, he asserted, political – and it's up to us to say what we want to be moralised in the future.

So there is a role for social work, but it's not what you might think: it's not about jumping on the latest bandwagon and terrifying people further. It's about taking a step back, looking critically at the problem, and offering a way forward that recognises the possible consequences (positive and negative) of our actions. This, after all, is what good social work practice is about.

Vivienne Cree is professor of social work studies at the University of Edinburgh; follow her on Twitter @VivCree. The [ESRC Moral Panic Seminar series](#) is a partnership between the universities of Edinburgh, Bath, Cardiff, Belfast, Sheffield and Manchester Metropolitan University. If you would like to blog for the [Social Care Network](#) about issues affecting [social care](#) professionals' working lives, email us at [socialcare@theguardian.com](mailto:atsocialcare@theguardian.com)